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S E C R E T HAVANA 000341

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/09/2029
TAGS: SNAR, PREL, SMIG, PGOV, CU, ASEC
SUBJECT: FROM THE MOUTH OF MINREX: POSSIBLE INSIGHT INTO
US-CU MIGRATION TALKS

REF: (A) HAVANA 172 (B) HAVANA 187

Classified By: COM JONATHAN FARRAR FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) & (D)

1. (S//NF) Summary: On 5 June, U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) Drug Interdiction Specialist (DIS) assigned to the United States Interests Section (USINT) in Havana, Cuba attended a repatriation of sixteen Cuban migrants at Bahia de Cabanas. During the transit to and from the pier, a Cuban Ministry of

Foreign Affairs (MINREX) official offered subtle insights on the possible GOC approach to the upcoming migration talks between the USG and GOC, and reiterated past statements regarding issues that he believes are of mutual concern between both nations. The conversation occurred immediately following 2 incidents involving the commandeering of a Cuban Border Guard (CBG) go-fast (gf) by 2 CBG recruits, and the appearance of 7 migrants in a raft in front of the USINT building. End Summary.

2. (S//NF) The 5 June repatriation was the second in a week, with the first taking place on 30 May. Armando Bencomo (Bencomo), the MINREX official in attendance, was uncharacteristically quiet on 30 May, choosing not to initiate conversation regarding policy issues as he normally does. On 30 May, DIS mentioned to Bencomo the prospect for re-initiation of migrant talks, to which Bencomo responded that his government was mulling over the offer. Bencomo, in typical fashion, made a point to reiterate that the former Bush administration had quashed the talks in 2004, and stated that the talks had previously been one of the only forms of productive candor between both parties.

3. (S//NF) Conversely, on 5 June, immediately upon embarking on the short gf trip to the migrant receiving pier at Cabanas, the conversation between DIS and Bencomo turned to the subject of the migration talks. However, the topic was brushed over, and Bencomo reiterated his past message that the GOC is also interested in engaging in talks on 3 additional topics: counterdrug, counterterrorism, and natural disaster response and preparation. These 3 items are common themes in conversations with Bencomo, and DIS believes, based on his repeated statements, and their recent offer to include these three topics as a way ahead between both sides, that the GOC's interest in these three items may be greater than migration-related issues.

4. (S//NF) Immediately following the repatriation, DIS and Bencomo boarded the gf for the ten minute trip back to the parking lot in the town of Cabanas. While boarding, in nonchalant fashion, Bencomo asked about the status of 2 CBG recruits who commandeered a CBG gf on the evening of 31 May. The 2 were ultimately rescued by the USCG when the gf they commandeered was located broken down fifty nautical miles northwest of Cuba. DIS informed Bencomo that the 2 were being treated per normal migrant processing protocols, and at the time of the conversation, disposition had not been determined- the issue was dropped immediately thereafter.

5. (S//NF) A more detailed conversation regarding the migrant talks ensued during the gf ride back to the parking area at Cabanas. Adding the disclaimer "in my opinion," Bencomo said he thought the talks will be a positive thing. DIS asked why, and Bencomo continued that the venue would be a good opportunity to discuss why Cubans choose to leave Cuba; specifically, Bencomo stated he believes the talks will help identify which factors motivate Cubans to depart the

island to pursue a life in the United States. Bencomo, without naming the policy, alluded to the "wet-foot, dry-foot" policy currently in place that permits Cubans who reach U.S. soil to remain there legally; Bencomo expressed rather subtly his disapproval of this policy. Further, he asserted that the talks would be a good venue where both sides might develop or agree to joint measures that would

help curtail a mass migration scenario from Cuba. In addition, he stated that the talks would help both sides to develop a response to a potential mass migration scenario. Finally, Bencomo alluded to the Cuban mass migration events in 1980 and 1994, and stated that in 1994 the U.S. encouraged the behavior of Cubans who chose to steal boats and depart the island by not returning those boats or treating said Cubans as criminals.

6. (S//NF) Recollecting an earlier conversation in which he stated that, although the U.S. had made some recent overtures towards the GOC, Bencomo stated that the U.S. could take "heavier" steps to change the nature of the relationship. DIS asked Bencomo why he believed migration talks and the other three topics mentioned above were so important if the GOC was so interested in seeing "heavier" changes. He stated that the aforementioned forums for engagement are a launching point, or segue, to further talks on larger issues, which we believe include the embargo, Guantanamo Bay, and the five Cuban spies. Bencomo summed up the Cuban outlook on the current USG-GOC relationship when he stated that "everything is in your (U.S.) hands." Note: This is a consistent theme heard from all of the DIS's Cuban contacts; GOC representatives persistently reiterate in their dialogue that the status of the USG-GOC is the fault of the U.S., and the road ahead lies entirely in the hands of the U.S. This line of conversation is usually accompanied by an unsolicited statement by the representatives that eschews the notion of human rights and pre-conditions asserted by the U.S. in any dealings with the GOC; both of these issues are so far beyond the consideration of GOC officials that merely mentioning them normally turns off a conversation in its entirety.

7. (S//NF) Summary: DIS assesses that the GOC will attempt to place the wet-foot, dry-foot issue at the center of the upcoming migrant talks, and perhaps hammer the policy as the prime reason for illicit Cuban migration departures from Cuba. The mention of a mass migration scenario by a Cuban official, especially one at the relatively high level that Bencomo currently holds, is unusual.

8. (S//NF) Further Summary: While the DIS has significant, regular contact during repatriations with Bencomo, DIS also has significant contact with Ministry of Interior (MININT) officials while carrying out counternarcotic and countermigration duties. As such, DIS has and continues to gather unique insight into the demeanor and consistent party line of these elements of the GOC. GOC officials tend to tow the same line; however, DIS has noticed a recent up-tick in

anti-U.S. policy candor from the various GOC officials. DIS estimates this is a sign that Cuban officials are uncomfortable with the shifting U.S. approach to dealing with Cuba demonstrated in recent months. In short, GOC is developing a defensive posture, and is utilizing their relationship with the DIS as one of an interlocutor to verbally state their interest in discussing issues of mutual cooperation; however, their actions, or lack thereof in some cases, suggest otherwise. For instance, in the aftermath of a large drug bust facilitated by US-Cuban-Bahamian information exchange, wherein the CBG recovered a large amount of marijuana and 3 traffickers, the Cuban representative from the Anti Drug Directorate utilized a follow-up meeting with the DIS to chastise U.S. authorities in the U.S. for not detecting trace amounts of marijuana concealed in ink markers and carried onto the island by Cuban American visitors. The GOC mentality that they are never in the wrong, and the U.S. has fostered the current poor state of relations between the two states, is more prevalent now than in the past year the DIS has spent on the island. End Summary.

FARRAR

=====CABLE ENDS=====